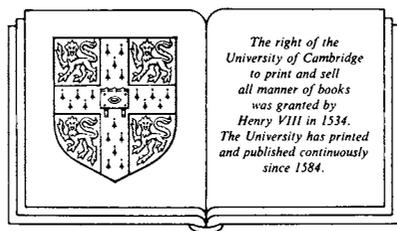


THE UPHEAVAL OF WAR

Family, Work and Welfare
in Europe, 1914–1918

Edited by Richard Wall and Jay Winter



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Introduction

The impact of the First World War on European political and economic history is a subject which has occupied historians virtually since the guns were silenced in 1918. A vast literature, at once complex, subtle and acrimonious, has emerged about the perennial political questions of war guilt, civil-military relations, and peace-making, the insoluble military problems of tactics and strategy, especially on the Western Front, and the fundamental economic problems of the mobilisation of men and material for war production and of the economic costs of the conflict.

It is only recently, however, that historians have begun to probe the social history of the war years, as a subject standing on its own, rather than as providing necessary background information for the analysis of political and economic developments.

In this field, as in others, French historians have taken the lead. This is in part a function of historiographical trends, in which the *Annales* school has been highly influential. It is not at all surprising that French cultural historians were among the first to examine trends in public opinion in wartime,¹ or to conduct the first systematic investigations of the true nature of war enthusiasm in 1914 and of social stability in the four grim years which followed,² or to provide the most profound and moving account of veterans of the First World War.³ But the richness of recent historical literature about the war period produced by French scholars is also a reflection of the wealth of documentary information, especially from police files, but also from other sources, which are readily available for scrutiny in French archives.

The fact that the vagaries of inclination and evidence have produced a number of fundamentally important works on the social history of wartime France should not detract, however, from similar though scattered contributions made by scholars working on the history of other combatant

nations. We have valuable studies of social tensions and social inequality in Germany,⁴ of class relations and the workings of social policy in Britain,⁵ as well as a growing literature on working-class life in general⁶ and on women's history, in particular.⁷

Indeed, it is precisely because there is a range of disparate and important research currently under way on the social history of the war period that we organised a conference on this subject, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, in Cambridge in 1983. The essays collected here were first presented to this conference and then substantially revised in the light of the ensuing discussion. Not all the original contributions, however, have been included in this volume. Our aim has been to provide a fully comparative framework, and to do so required that each major topic be examined in more than one country. Some essays of real importance on themes not taken up systematically in other parts of the book were, therefore, omitted, or published elsewhere.⁸

Essentially, the issues raised by these papers address the question of the destabilising effects of the First World War on domestic life in a number of combatant countries. The obvious way to begin such a discussion is to examine the direct consequences of wartime mobilisation on the material conditions of the people. Chapters 1 and 2 in part one introduce demographic data on this and related themes. They provide an explicitly comparative perspective which enables us to grasp some of the key similarities and differences in the responses of the populations of the major combatant countries to the upheaval of war.

The chapters in part two provide further documentation and discussion of the effects of the war on conditions of life and standards of living. The contrasts in the degree of deprivation suffered by civilian populations on opposing sides are vividly documented for the Central Powers by the essays of Sieder on Vienna, Scholliers and Daelemans on occupied Belgium, Triebel on Germany, and for the Allies by Fridenson for France, and by Dewey and Reid for Britain.

These essays form the foundation for the third and fourth parts of the book, which deal with the role of women in wartime economy and society, and with the efforts of diverse groups, working both within and outside government circles, to promote the stability of the family in wartime. Two central conclusions emerge here. The first is the relatively minor degree to which the sexual division of labour was disturbed by the war. Robert shows conclusively that the war represents not the opening of new opportunities for women, but rather the end of a trend of high female participation rates in extra-domestic employment in France. Similarly, Thom and Daniel offer strong correctives to the view that the war transformed the pattern of women's industrial work in Britain or Germany. It is only in the service

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sector, that is in white-collar jobs, that we can see the long-term effects of the war in diversifying the occupational distribution of the female labour force.

The second salient argument which arises is the similarity in the pronatalist outlook and policy initiatives of many groups in the major combatant nations concerned with protecting family life from the corrosive effects of the war. Huss's illustrations of the messages contained in pronatalist post-cards, Soloway's discussion of the language of the British eugenics movement, Weindling's study of social hygiene and the German medical profession, and Osborne's description of parallel German efforts to promote childbirth as woman's 'active service' all point in the same direction: towards the emergence in wartime of a broadly based campaign to ensure that the war did not undermine traditional patterns of authority within the family or the traditional sexual division of labour.

Reulecke's essay on middle-class youth movements in Germany describes a radically different response to what contemporaries called the 'crisis' of the family in the period of the First World War. The search for a new kind of masculine loyalty antedated the war but took on a new urgency for some unsettled and romantic individuals. This quest for community turned away from the family towards the *Männerbund*, or heroic men's league. After a relatively quiet phase in the mid-1920s, such groups reappeared in a new and more sinister form. The adoption by the Nazis of facets of this phenomenon, replete with anti-feminine and anti-familial rhetoric, shows that one must not exaggerate the extent to which the war crisis led to a revival of the cult of the family. Those who survived the war spoke in discordant and contradictory voices. Some fled from the family and all it signified, but on the basis of the evidence presented in these essays, more returned to family life readily and with relief.

The demographic impact of these different campaigns for and against the family is very difficult to estimate. We know that nuptiality rates recovered after the wild fluctuations of the war, but in the cases of Britain and France, this may have had less to do with ideological currents than with changes in patterns of emigration and a narrowing of the age and social difference between marriage partners.⁹ We know as well that the decline of fertility which had set in well before the war continued at least for another two decades after it.¹⁰ And we know that despite an increase in the divorce rate after the war in a number of different countries, the family life-cycle after the war was not radically different from that before the outbreak of hostilities.¹¹

In effect, the cumulative and collective impression of these essays in the social, cultural and demographic history of the 1914-18 war is to reveal the dialectical or contradictory character of the conflict. First, it disturbed family life by military and industrial mobilisation; but secondly, it released social and political forces which helped restore family life in its older forms.

Of course, counter-tendencies and exceptions may be noted. As Reulecke has shown, other forms of masculine bonding and association also emerged in this period. Many such developments were class-specific, requiring us whenever possible to move from the discussion of national to cross-sectional trends, as the essays by Reid and Fridenson on the effect of the war on the British and French working class demonstrate. The way forward is clearly towards more local and regional studies, of the kind presented by Sieder on working-class Vienna, through which the true texture of the war experience may be recaptured.

When such studies are available they will enable us to see to what extent the civilian populations of the major combatant nations sustained the war effort and, despite bereavement, deprivation, and stress of all kinds, still managed to preserve the fundamental features of pre-war family life. The inferences which may be drawn from these studies may go further still. Just as Charles Maier has shown that the power of industrial elites was first challenged and then reinforced by the 1914–18 war,¹² so the essays in this book suggest that the full effect of the war was to restore pre-war social forms rather than to undermine them. Perhaps it was only natural that the catastrophic human losses of the war led to a reinforcement of family life in its aftermath. Perhaps it was understandable that ex-soldiers, many of whom returned home defeated and disillusioned, insisted that their place within the family was preserved or even enhanced. Perhaps some women even welcomed the restoration after 1918; certainly few people asked for their opinion about an issue central to their welfare and their lives. But the weight of evidence from many quarters seems to point towards the view that, in terms of the social history of the European family, the First World War was more a conservative than a revolutionary force.

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Notes

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